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In Defense of 'Invented Traditions': The History of Okinawa as Portrayed in Narratives of Karate

Introduction

It has been twenty-five years since Eric Hobsbawm published his celebrated essay on inventing traditions.[1] The 'invention of traditions' has since become a catchphrase of postmodern studies. It tells a great deal about the origin of modern nations – how people construct and manipulate symbols in order to legitimize their claims to distinctive nationhood – as well as it helps us understand the world-wide process of 'glocalization' and the phenomenon of suddenly awakened ethnic communities. Cultures and ideas that supposedly were inherited from our remote ancestors turn out to be recently invented. This applies even to old nations such as Japan, as Stephen Vlastos et al. inform us.[2]

The 'invention of traditions' had originally been invented by historians, but was quickly seized by anthropologists. Not everyone was happy to see this. Studying culture, Marshall Sahlins argued, is not about proving whether it is real or essential, as this contains a risk of idealizing 'real' culture as fixed and unchangeable. Studying culture is about questioning its symbolical meanings and function within a given social context. The criteria of time and truth are not applicable. What matters is how traditions sustain the social structure.

> From what I know about culture, (…) traditions are invented in the specific terms of the people who construct them. Fundamentally, they are atemporal, being for the people conditions of their form of life as constituted, and considered coeval with it. It follows that if such traditions are authoritatively narrativized, or when they contingently rise to consciousness, they will be aetiologized: that is, as charter myths. But then, analytically to fix their historical appearance at some time short of the origin of things is always possible, and always falls short of

[1] Eric Hobsbawm, 'Introduction: Inventing Traditions', in: Eric Hobsbawm, Terence Ranger, eds., *The Invention of Tradition*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983.

[2] Stephen Vlastos, ed., *Mirror of Modernity: Invented Traditions of Modern Japan*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998.

> understanding them (…). In all cases, the missing part is *the comparative sense of cultures as meaningful orders*.[3]

Putting aside the question of whether 'inventing traditions' has indeed anything interesting to say in anthropology, let us return it to where it belongs, namely to the historians. Traditions present a source of knowledge about the past, so if they badly distort or invent the past, historians have a justified right to protest.

Karate fairly deserves the label of 'invented tradition.' Although it is an old martial art, its philosophical frame which refers to samurai traditions and the notion of pacifism is a new construct that was made up only in modern times. The story of karate sustains popular narratives that aim at depicting Okinawans as a peace-loving people constantly oppressed by the Japanese. Karate, in a manner of speaking, encapsulates the experience of Okinawan people under the Japanese rule and reflects their troubled identity. It has a lot to say about how Okinawan people struggled with an inferiority complex by trying to present themselves as genuine Japanese, and then how they tried to disassociate from the Japanese nation-state and its nasty militaristic past. Of course, the novelty of karate neither strips it of its beauty, nor suggests any lack of authenticity. The problem lies elsewhere. The 'samuraized' karate has created a collection of myths about Okinawa that stay at odds with the historical facts. Once this had been exported to the West, it began to serve as an important source of knowledge about Okinawa (as far as concerns my homeland Poland, it is the only source, because Okinawan studies in Poland are perhaps prospective, yet not impressive). As a result, Western karatekas tend to confuse Okinawa with Japan. They ascribe to Okinawa events that had taken place in Japan and describe Okinawa using the language of Japanese culture. Put simply, they Japanize the entire past of Okinawa.

Definition

By 'karate' we understand Okinawan martial arts that include weaponless techniques (the celebrated 'empty hands') as well as techniques of fighting with weapons, such as *bō* (staff), *sai* (spit-shaped batton), *tonfa* (truncheon) and *kama* (scythe). The latter are often referred to as *kobujutsu* (lit. 'old martial art'). Many karatekas would call it heresy to confuse *kobujutsu* with karate, but we do not stick to formal definitions. As cultural

[3] Marshall Sahlins, 1999, 'Two or three things that I know about culture', *The Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute,* Vol. 5, No. 3, September 1999, p. 409. Emphasis added.

phenomena they share the same history and traditions and thus they play the same role in projecting the image of Okinawa.

Practicing *kata*, or figure, constitutes the core of karate. *Kata* is a sequence of fixed choreographic movements that are supposed to emulate the actual situations in combat. [4] Reaching perfection in *kata* requires endless repetition of the sequence with a great attention paid to proper posture, symmetry, balance and breathing. Apart from its pedagogical role of teaching patience, *kata* embeds the spiritual aspect of karate, as it prepares one's mind to win an idealized combative encounter.[5] There are about fifty kinds of *kata*, representing different levels of difficulty and different schools. The other form of karate is *kumite* (sparring) which was created for the practitioners who wish to check their skills against a real partner.

The History

What do we know about the origins of karate? Unfortunately, not much. Old masters were too reluctant to leave any written accounts to posterity and all that we can rely on are the oral accounts that were often narrativized in the 19th century. Before that time karate was barely mentioned in any documents. At any rate, we know for sure that karate derived from Chinese martial arts and was developed in Okinawa – the capital island of the Ryukyu Kingdom. The Ryukyu Kingdom was a small maritime country that maintained close relations with China. Since 1372 it belonged to the Chinese network of tributary states. In exchange for recognizing China's suzerainty Ryukyuan rulers were granted investiture confirming their rights to the throne and a privilege of trading with China. China's recognition facilitated trade with other South-East Asian countries. Ryukyuan ships called at harbors of Malakka, Palembang (Indonesia), Annam (Vietnam), Siam and of course Japan and Korea.[6] For the poor kingdom of Ryukyu overseas trade became the source of wealth and opened access to cultural and technological novelties. It is worth noting that Ryukyu was the most favored vassal-state of China. Ryukyuan envoys were entitled to visit Beijing every two years. The emperor always repaid them with gifts the value of which usually exceeded the value of the tribute

[4] Kevin Tan, 'Constructing a martial tradition: Rethinking a popular history of karate-dou', *Journal of Sport & Social Issues*, Vol. 28, No. 2, May 2004, p. 171.

[5] Ibidem.

[6] For more about Ryukyuan overseas trade see: Takara Kurayoshi, *Ryūkyū no jidai: ōi naru rekishizō wo motomete* (*The Era of Ryukyu: Searching for an Image of a Great History*). Naha: Hirugisha, 1989, pp. 87-148; George Kerr, *Okinawa: The History of an Island People,* Boston: Tuttle Publishing, 2000, pp. 83-148.

from the Ryukyuan king. China generously sponsored scholarships for Ryukyuan students at Chinese academies and for a brief time was even providing the Ryukyuan fleet with new ships.[7] These relations continued for five hundred years until the fall of the kingdom in 1879. Being the most favored nation the Ryukyuans remained the most loyal; after Japan had annexed Okinawa Ryukyuan noblemen vehemently protested against the termination of ties with the Chinese court.

Historical sources are not clear about how and when the Ryukyuans came in contact with Chinese martial arts. Most likely it happened in China, but it could also have been someone from the suite of Chinese envoys to Ryukyu who introduced the art of *quanfa* 拳法. The Japanese treatise *Ōshima hikki* (*Accounts from Ōshima*, 18th century) suggests the latter possibility. *Ōshima hikki* was written by a Confucian scholar from Tosa domain, Tobe Yoshihiro (1713-95). Tobe had a chance to meet a Ryukyuan envoy to Satsuma, Shiyohira-peechin, whose ship drifted ashore in Tosa in 1762. While assisting Shiyohira on the way to Ōshima, he did not miss a rare opportunity to inquire him about the Ryukyus. They spent long hours on conversations and thus the *Ōshima hikki* was born. Quite disappointingly, the book contains only a short passage referring to martial arts. It mentions a Chinese master in martial arts (*kumiaijutsu*) named Kōshankin (Kusanku) who had demonstrated a technique of fighting with bare hands and feet, enabling a small and weak person to knock down a strongman.[8] Kōshankin was said to have arrived in Okinawa in 1756 – the year when king Shō Boku received investiture from the Chinese emperor – and most likely he was a staff member of the Chinese mission. Although *Ōshima hikki* suggests that *quanfa* might have been introduced to Okinawa only in the middle of the 18th century, it does not rule out the possibility that it had happened earlier. At any rate, in popular narratives Kōshankin has been recognized as the precursor of karate.

The oral history ascribes the beginning of karate to Sakugawa Kanga (1782-1863), known as Tōde Sakugawa, or Sakugawa the Chinese Hand. He was born to an aristocratic family from Shuri, the capital of Ryukyu. His family derived from an old clan Eki that claimed ancestry in the royal family.[9] As a nobleman of a high birth, he followed a bureaucratic career

[7] Takara Kurayoshi, p. 142.

[8] Digitalized copy of *Ōshima hikki*, p. 67. Okinawa rekishi jōhō kenkyūkai, http://www.okinawa.oiu.ac.jp/, accessed on 19 Feb. 2008.

[9] The founder of the clan, Urasoe-ueekata Kan'an was said to be an illegitimate son of King Shō Shin. See: Tawata Shinsuke, *Monchū fudoki* (*History of Okinawan Clans*), Naha: Okinawa Taimususha, 1986, p. 162; Tawata Masayuki, Miyazato Chōkō, eds., *Okinawa monchū daijiten*

and managed to climb to the post of governor *zaiban* in the Yaeyama Islands, which he held between 1835-8. For his distinguished service he received a fiefdom in Sakugawa and hence his surname.[10] Sakugawa was said to have studied martial arts in China, but his career as a karate master was not recorded and thus his biography has been highly mythologized. Some karatekas erroreously believe Sakugawa to have lived half-century earlier and studied under Kōshankin.[11]

The documented past of karate reaches back to the early 19th century. Genealogies of all karate schools begin with Matsumura Sōkon (1809-1896), Matsumora Kōsaku (1829-1898) and their contemporaries. It was only then that the Okinawans began to identify three styles of karate, named after the towns of Shuri, Naha and Tomari. In comparison to Shuri-te and Tomari-te, the Naha-te style was said to be more modern and Chinese, but of course all three styles had been strongly influenced by *quanfa*.[12] Perhaps it was the identity factor that encouraged the Okinawans to draw lines within karate and invent new traditions with separate genealogies. The dividing lines conflated with social boundaries that had been drawn and institutionalized by the Ryukyuans state. In the 17th century the kingdom adopted the Confucian model of social organization and introduced a policy of strict social division. The law segregated commoners from aristocrats, dividing the latter into five groups: from Shuri, Naha, Kumemura, Tomari and remote islands (Miyako, Yaeyama).[13] Due to legal differences in their status, there was a fair amount of animosity and rivalry between them. Noblemen from Shuri enjoyed the highest status: they took over the most lucrative posts in the state administration and it was relatively easy for them to climb the ladder of court ranks. Aristocrats from Kumemura, as descendants of Chinese

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(*Great Encyclopedia of Okinawan Clans*), Naha Shuppansha: Haebaru, 2001, p. 304.

[10] Okinawa taimususha, ed., *Okinawa daihyakka jiten* (*Great Encyclopedia of Okinawa*), Naha: Okinawa Taimususha, 1983, vol. 2, p. 914; *Okinawa monchū daijiten*, p. 280.

[11] This information can be found, for example, in English and German editions of Wikipedia: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kanga_Sakukawa;
http://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Teruya_Kanga_Sakugawa, accessed on 20 March 2008
and on many websites of karate clubs. Refer also to: Kevin Tan, p. 178.

[12] *Okinawa daihyakka jiten*, vol. 1, p. 771.

[13] Place of habitation was not the only category determining one's social status. In fact the social configuration was extremely complex with a system of court ranks intertwining with official ranks. Noblemen were grouped into two categories of *chikudun* and *satonushi*, and besides the law discriminated between the 'new' and 'old' aristocracy (*shinsan* and *fudai*). See: Dana Masayuki, 'Minbunsei: shi to nō' ('System of Social Division: Aristocrats and Peasants'), in: Ryūkyū Shimpōsha, ed., *Shin Ryūkyū shi: kinsei hen* (*2*) (*The new history of Ryukyu: early modern times, part two*). Naha: Ryūkyū Shimpōsha, 1992.

immigrants, retained separate privileges and traditionally oversaw the management of overseas trade. Noblemen from Naha and Tomari had many reasons to feel underprivileged, but nonetheless their status was much higher than that of local aristocrats from Miyako and Yaeyama. The state policy discouraged people from migrating and thus enhanced the rise of local cultures and identities. And this is how Shuri-te, Naha-te and Tomari-te were born. Interestingly, these schools quickly disappeared after the fall of the kingdom, when Okinawa entered the path of modernization. With the removal of all socio-cultural constraints karate could finally cross social and geographic boundaries, only to quickly evolve into new styles: Shōrin-ryū, Gōjū-ryū, Uechi-ryū and others. This suggests that the traditions of early karate schools were fragile, novel and to some extent created *post mortem*.

Despite the fact that after the annexation of Ryukyu contacts with China were severely hampered, karate masters continued drawing upon Chinese martial arts. In the late 19th century a copy of *Wubeizhi* (An account of Military Arts and Science), a Chinese book introducing the art of boxing known as White Crane, was brought from Fujian to Okinawa. This was the first textbook on martial arts ever introduced in Okinawa. Reportedly it influenced a number of masters, including Miyagi Chōjun (1888-1953), founder of the Gōjū-ryū school.[14] In 1912 a Chinese tea-merchant from Fujian named Wu Xiangui (1886-1940) settled in Naha. Wu was a master of the above-mentioned White Crane style, he trained a number of Okinawans and was befriended by masters Miyagi Chōjun and Uechi Kambun (1877-1948), founder of the Uechi-ryū. Uechi himself spent thirteen years in China studying under the guidance of *quanfa* masters.

Karate, however, could not remain unaffected by the social transition towards assimilation with Japan. With the passage of time Okinawan people began identifying themselves as members of the Japanese nation. The cultural heritage of Ryukyu needed to be revised so that it could help enhance the Japanese identity. And thus a new tradition of karate was born.

The Myth of Samurai

At the beginning of the 20th century the process of Okinawa's integration with Japan was well in progress. The defeat of China in the 1895 war snuffed out the last hope of Ryukyuan noblemen for the restoration of the kingdom. The generation of young Okinawans, who had already been educated at Japanese universities, called for quick integration with

[14] *Okinawa daihyakka jiten*, vol.3., p. 389.

Japanese society, as they believed that this was the only way Okinawa could join the modern world. Advocates of the assimilation policy urged people to abandon local traditions and adopt Japanese patterns of culture. The government eventually recognized Okinawa's endeavors at becoming Japanese. The prefecture was integrated under the Meiji constitution and received two seats in the Diet. By 1920 all legal and administrative differences between Okinawa and Japan proper were abolished.

In reality, however, Okinawans could never overcome the status of second-rank nationals. Japanese society found Okinawa too exotic to recognize it as an integral part of Japan. In popular consciousness the Ryukyu Islands with their subtropical climate belonged to so-called 'southern seas countries' (*nan'yōdo*). This term referred to the South Pacific Islands, specifically to the Japanese colonial possessions among the Mariana and Marshall Islands. The Japanese imagined *nan'yōdo* as a tropical paradise inhabited by mild yet primitive savages, waiting to be civilized by Japan. In the eyes of some anthropologists and vanguards of colonial studies, southern people were idle, lazy, and incapable of developing a sophisticated culture. Scholars ascribed the reason for the cultural inferiority of the South to the climate. According to Watsuji Tetsurō, for example, due to the monotonously hot climate people in the South lacked a sense of time, and the ease of obtaining food had prevented them from developing creativeness.[15] Satō Hiroshi raised a similar argument by saying that southern peoples were incapable of developing independent states, unless with help from people from the North.[16]

Being stereotyped as lazy and backward the Okinawans constantly struggled with social discrimination. All that the Japanese wanted to see in Okinawa was prostitutes, pork, potatoes and 'barbarian' customs of hand-tattooing. Ryukyuan high culture had no chance to capture the mind of the Japanese and apart from a small number of ethnologists, who had discovered in Ryukyu traits of ancient Japan, no one was interested in Okinawa. Only karate possessed the potential to show a truly 'Japanese' (not to say 'samurai') face for Okinawa. And thus a 'samuraized' version of karate was introduced to the Japanese who discovered in it a foundry of

[15] Watsuji Tetsurō, *Fūdo: ningengakuteki kōsatsu* (*The Land and its Characteristics: An Approach from Humanics Studies*). Tōkyō: Iwanami Shoten, 1985 [1935], p. 27.

[16] Satō Hiroshi, 'Nampō kyōeikan no chiseigaku teki tembō' ('Geopolitical Survey of the Southern Co-prosperity Sphere'), in: Satō Hiroshi, ed. *Nampō kyōeiken no zembō* (*A Detailed Report from the Southern Co-prosperity Sphere*). Tōkyō: Ōbunsha, 1942, pp. 21-2. For more about the Japanese colonial discourse on the South see: Yano Tōru, *'Nanshin' no keifu* (*The history of Southern Advance*). Tōkyō: Chūōkōronsha, 1975.

the 'Japanese spirit' (*yamato damashii*) and incorporated it into the set of national representations. It is worth noting that when the Crown Prince Hirohito briefly visited Okinawa on his way to Europe in 1921, local authorities organized a public demonstration of karate for the future emperor. The event took place in the picturesque scenery of the Shuri Castle where master Funakoshi Gichin (1868-1957) led the performance.

The Japanese chapter of karate begins with Funakoshi. Trained in the Shuri-te style by Itosu Ankō (1831-1915) and Asato Ankō (1838-?), he had great merits in propagating karate among the Okinawan youth. He presided over the Okinawan Association of Martial Arts (*Okinawa shōbukai*) and trained students at the Okinawa Teachers College. In 1916-17 he stayed in Kyoto where he gave a public presentation of his skills in the Butokuden Hall at the Heian Jingū Shrine. This reportedly was the first demonstration of karate in Japan.[17] Funakoshi returned to the mainland in 1922 – this time to Tokyo – to attend the Physical Education Exhibition and the Old Martial Arts Exhibition organized under the auspices of the Ministry of Education. The news about Funakoshi quickly spread among practitioners of martial arts in Tokyo. Funakoshi soon received an invitation from Kanō Jigorō (1860-1938) – the father of *jūdō* – to visit his *dōjō* at the Kōdōkan Hall. Being encouraged by a warm reception, he decided to stay in Tokyo and devote his life to propagating karate. Thanks to him, the first karate clubs were established at Tokyo universities, including Keiō, Takushoku, Waseda and the Imperial University of Tokyo. In addition he published a number of books and articles about karate. They included the famous 'Twenty Principles of Karate' (Karate dō nijūkajō), nowadays considered as the quintessence of the karate philosophy that every beginner must learn before entering a *dōjō*. In 1936 he set up his own school Shōtōkan. Until his death in 1957 he brought up hundreds of students. Although he wished karate would remain only one, it unavoidably evolved into numerous new schools.[18]

From Funakoshi's memoirs we receive a portrait of a true samurai being excessively strict about proper etiquette and self-discipline. As expected from a genuine warrior, he was a high-cultured person who devoted much of his time to calligraphy and poetry. Putting himself as an example he passed a message to his students that karate is an art embedded with moral values of a warrior's code of conduct. Following *jūdō*, *kendō* and *aikidō* he

[17] *Okinawa daihyakka jiten*, vol. 3, p. 386.

[18] For more on Funakoshi see: Gichin Funakoshi, *Karate-dō: My Way of Life*, Tokyo: Kodansha International, 1981.

renamed karate to *karate-dō*, or 'the way of karate'. He accomplished his mission of popularizing karate with great success: in 1931 karate was officially recognized by the Japanese Association of Martial Arts (Nippon Butokukai).

Funakoshi was not alone in his work. Great merit should also be given to his friend Nakasone Genwa (1895-1978), who published *The Overview of Karate-dō* (*Karate dō taikan*, 1938), a four-hundred-page volume that was the first comprehensive study on karate. Nakasone was a publicist and teacher from Okinawa. Before he befriended Funakoshi, he was a political activist of leftist provenience. The flirtation with communism cost him four years in prison. Having left the jail he made a volte-face to preach nationalist ideals and thus his publications about karate were filled with the war propaganda.

During the American occupation, the MacArthur's administration laid a ban on martial arts perceiving them as a potential threat of revived militarism in Japanese society. Karate, however, managed to avoid the fate of *jūdō* or *kendō*. First of all, it was not yet as popular as *jūdō* which had already been included into the school curriculum. Secondly, the Americans perceived Okinawa as a victim of Japanese imperialism and hence they saw no need to conduct any ideological lustration of its culture. Thus karate managed to preserve its samurai tradition and propagate to conquer the West.

Karate hit the consciousness of the Westerners; people found in it an idealized image of Asia rich in values that seem to be either absent or long forgotten in the West. Karate puts a great emphasis on spiritual training, renounces violence and glorifies a moral code of conduct. By these characteristics, it appears to work like an antidote to the illnesses of Western societies, caused by the dictatorship of free-for-all and rat-race cultures. Undoubtedly, karate has played a role in popularizing Japan in the West – it did help combat the stereotype of a cruel and fanatic Japanese – but nevertheless the way it portrays Japan often qualifies as pure Orientalism (a similar accusation can be raised against kung-fu and other Asian martial arts).

Karate's mythicization should be understood in a broader context of Westerners' confusion about Japan's emergence as an economic superpower. Westerners treated Japan as a kind of anomaly in the world where the superiority of Western civilization seemed to be unchallenged. Japan has shattered the ideas of progress and modernity. The only way to solve this paradox was to accept Japan's uniqueness, namely that it was

subjected to distinctive socio-cultural processes not applicable to any other society. And this is how the Westerners became obsessed with the search for traits of samurai and geisha legacies in nearly every aspect of the Japanese life. The concept of *dō*, or 'way', has caught special attention. People have come to celebrate it as if it represented the essence of Japanese nature. Japanese people are said not to practice art and craft, but to follow their 'way'. They do not study tea-ceremony, neither practice calligraphy, but follow the way of tea (*sadō*) and brush (*shodō*). Above all, people in the West have been fascinated with the 'samurai way', or *bushidō*, that puts enormous emphasis on honor and loyalty. *Bushidō* is often perceived as a clue to understanding the phenomenon of modern Japan. The samurai notions of honor, loyalty and duty neatly explain the reasons of why Japan embarked on the war with the USA (see *The Chrysanthemum and The Sword* by Ruth Benedict) and help understand Japan's postwar economic miracle, in particular the success of the Japanese management system.
Karatekas eagerly draw upon *bushidō*'s symbolism. In Poland, for example, there are karate clubs named 'Samurai' and 'Ronin'.[19] Karate is said to encapsulate the essence of a warrior's spirit. A karateka practicing *kata* everyday is like a samurai toughening his skills in swordplay. Karate is not just a sport – it is a way of a modern samurai:

> The art of karate, synonymous with kata is something that has been created by the efforts of thousands of people over the course of centuries. The composers of the kata, many of whom were samurai class, put a part of themselves into the kata. Especially their spirit of bushi-do which carries on by the unbroken cultural chain through the practice of kata. The samurai of ancient Okinawa were the enforcing arms of the nobility. Bushi-do was a way of life where honor was of the utmost importance. (…) Kata, even today, is something of a spiritual metaphor to this code of bushi-do. (…) The commitment to oneself to develop the flow of the kata through repetition represents the obligations of warrior. Certainly there are many parallels to be drawn here, most important, the spirit of bushi-do which is still alive in karate and where honor, loyalty, and respects are a large part of life in the dojo today.[20]

[19] http://www.ronin.pl/; http://www.wdq.home.pl/samuraj/, accessed on 19 March 2008.
[20] Robert Scaglione, *Karate of Okinawa: Building Warrior Spirit with Gan, Soku Tanden Riki*, New York: Person-to Person Publishing, 2001, p. 112.

There is one missing point: in premodern Okinawa there were no samurai and thus no *bushidō* code was in force. Apart from a small royal guard, the Ryukyuans kept no army. We should not be mislead by the Ryukyuan term *samuree* 士: it referred not to the class of warriors, but to the noblemen and hence it should not be confused with the Japanese samurai. The term itself suggests the samurai lineage of the Ryukyuan aristocracy, but the majority of noblemen originated from among royal officials. In official documents the noblemen were referred to as *shizoku* 士族, but the other widely used term was *yukatchu* 良人 – lit. 'good person'. The responsibility for this confusion can be partially put on Funakoshi. Whether intentionally or not, he failed to explain to his readers the difference between the Japanese and Okinawan samurai. Once his books have been translated into Western languages, the myth of samurai has started a new life.

The Myth of Pacifism

Okinawa has successfully created a self-image of a peace-loving people with an allergy to wars encoded in genes. The myth of a peace-loving people has significantly shaped the identity of local people. The Okinawans see themselves as victims of Japanese and American imperialism: in 1879 they lost independence and were deprived of nationhood as then they were put through the mill of Japanization. In 1945 they were used as a shield against the American invaders. The Battle of Okinawa cost the lives of nearly ninety-four thousand civilians. People died and witnessed the death of their relatives only to realize that their sacrifice was in vain. After the war the Japanese government eagerly ceded Okinawa to the Americans in exchange for a return of sovereignty. Even if Okinawa eventually returned to Japan in 1972, it continues to be disproportionately burdened with Japan's obligations to its American ally. Okinawa Prefecture constitutes only 0.6 percent of the Japanese territory, but hosts 69 percent of American military forces deployed in Japan and the military bases occupy 10 percent of the total area of the prefecture (18.7 percent of Okinawa Island).[21] The presence of the US forces not only hampers the development of the prefecture, but also threatens people's safety and disturbs their daily life.

[21] *Okinawa no beigun oyobi jieitai no kichi: tōkei shiryō shū* (*American Military Forces and Japanese Self-Defence Forces Bases in Okinawa: Statistical Data*), Okinawa: Okinawa ken chiji kōshitsu kichi taisaku ka, 2007, pp. 2-3.

The myth of a peace-loving people is a part of the political strategy aiming at the withdrawal of the American military forces from Okinawan soil. The Okinawans claim that it is a historical injustice that a country that had never fought a war in its entire history has been forced to serve the imperial politics of a foreign country. This argument was used by Governor Ōta Masahide during the political crisis between Tokyo and Okinawa in 1995-6. The crisis was sparked by an incident that involved three American servicemen who had abducted and raped a local teenage-girl. Following the wave of anti-American resentments Ōta refused to authorize the renewal of land-lease contracts for the military bases. In return the government brought him to court and charged with failing to fulfill his duties as governor. When testifying in the Supreme Court, Ōta defended his rationale by emphasizing the cultural and historical differences between Okinawa and Japan. As he stated, 'in contrast to Japan's "warrior culture", Okinawa's is notable for an "absence of militarism"'.[22]

There are two specific stories that have risen to consciousness among Okinawan people. The first one is about Napoleon Bonaparte who reportedly could not believe that there was a land inhabited by friendly people who had no arms and no knowledge of warfare. Napoleon learned of Ryukyu from a British captain Basil Hall on St. Helena Island. Hall and his crew called at Okinawa in 1816. They were deeply touched by the courtesy of local people. In contrast to the Chinese and Koreans, the Ryukyuans seemed to epitomize politeness and friendliness.[23] Thanks to Hall, the news about a peace-loving people spread throughout the world (it even inspired the pacifist movement in the USA in the middle of the 19th century[24]).

The second story refers to King Shō Shin (ruled in 1477-1526), the greatest king in Ryukyuan history. Under his rule the kingdom reached the peak of its strength and prosperity. Shō Shin incorporated the Miyako and Yaeyama Islands, consolidated the government and introduced an effective administration in remote provinces. Overseas trade flourished as never before and afterwards. Shō Shin has been particularly remembered for two deeds: he ordered all warlords to abandon their lands and to settle down in Shuri under his watchful eye. Secondly, he ordered the construction of an armory in the capital so that the kingdom could be prepared for attacks

[22] Ota Masahide, *Essays on Okinawa Problems*, Gushikawa: Yui Shuppan, 2000, p. 235.
[23] See: George Kerr, pp. 249-60.
[24] See: Teruya Yoshihiko, 'Ryūkyū and its role in Western thought: Euro-American peace movements in the early nineteenth century', in: Josef Kreiner, ed., *Ryūkyū in World History*, Bonn: Bier'sche Verlaganstalt, 2001.

from the pirates. The so-called Eleven Distinctions of the Age, that were engraved on a balustrade in the Shuri Castle to commemorate his achievements at the thirtieth anniversary of his enthronement, contained the following inscription: 'Swords, bows, and arrows are exclusively accumulated as weapons in the protection of the country'.[25] This inscription has been misinterpreted by the influential historian Iha Fuyū (1876-1947); Shō Shin allegedly ordered the collection of all weapons in the country in order to prevent civil wars.[26] Because Iha was an unquestionable authority in academic circles, his interpretation has been commonly accepted by scholars. And so the myth of King Shō Shin was born – a pacifist who had banned private ownership and use of arms.

Karate serves to enhance the myth of a peace-loving people. The fundamental principle of karate – *karate ni sente nashi* (there is no attack in karate) – is nowadays said to reflect the true spirit of Okinawan people. As master Nagamine Shōshin stated, 'The peculiar culture of the Okinawans, a peace-loving people desirous of living without weapons, made them raise the instinct of self-preservation to its highest form – the art of karate-do'.[27]

The above-mentioned principle was formulated by Funakoshi Gichin. The power of karate, he emphasized, under no circumstances shall be abused; one can resort to it only in an act of self-defense or to protect the weaker. Funakoshi claimed that the renunciation of violence was peculiar to all Japanese martial arts (*budō*) and was embedded in the ideograph *bu* 武 (military affairs). As he explained the ideograph, its meaning is 'to stop hostilities' – literally 'to halt people who crossed their shields and spears' (*futari kanka wo majietaru wo naka ni haitte tomeru*).[28] Nakasone Genwa put it more simply: *bu* consists of two elements, *hoko* 戈 (spear) and *tomeru* 止 (to stop); its meaning is 'to block a spear' (*hoko wo tomeru*).[29] Today's dictionaries, however, provide a different etymology. According to *Dai Kanwa jiten*, for instance, *bu* indeed means 'to stop hostilities':

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[25] Mitsugu Sakihara, 'Afterword', in: George Kerr, p. 544. For the Japanese version see Takara Kurayoshi, p. 201.

[26] Iha Fuyū, *Kotōku no Ryūkyū shi* (*The History of the Ordeal of the Lonely Islands of Ryukyu*), in: Iha *Fuyū Zenshū* (*Compiled Works of Iha Fuyū*), Tōkyō: Heibonsha, 1974, vol. 2, pp. 194-6.

[27] Nagamine Shoshin, *The Essence of Okinawan Karate-do (Shorin-ryu*), Tokyo: Charles E. Tuttle Company, 1976, p. 13.

[28] Funakoshi Gichin, *Rentan goshin karate jutsu* (*Strengthening the Spirit and Skills of Self-defense through Techniques of Karate*), Okinawa: Yōjusha, 1996 [reprint of the 1925 edition], p. 295.

[29] Nakasone Genwa, *Karate dō taikan* (*The Overview of Karate-dō*), Tōkyō: Rokurindō Shoten, 1991 [1938], p. 69.

precisely speaking 'to nip the war in the bud by means of shields and spears' (*kanka no chikara ni yori heiran wo mizen ni fusegu*). Yet 止 in this context denotes 足 (*ashi*, leg), and the meaning of the whole character is 'to hold a spear and to go fighting' (*hoko wo motte tatakai ni iku*).[30] Whether this is an act of self-defense or renunciation of violence, we leave this question to cultural relativists.

This is not to say that karate's principle of nonviolence is novel or invented by Funakoshi. Funakoshi frequently quoted his great masters Asato and Itosu who had instructed him to avoid fights by all means. Karate, however, not always served the ideology of pacifism. Karate masters, like other ordinary people, were not immune to Japanese nationalism. There was nothing unusual in this in view of Okinawa's efforts toward quick assimilation (Funakoshi himself was a fervent worshipper of the Emperor and took pride of his friendship with many military leaders). As a consequence the philosophy of karate came to legitimize the project of nation-building. In the 1930s, it was appropriated by the war propaganda. Through the mouth of Funakoshi and Nakasone, it came to justify Japan's policy of expansion.

Let us turn back to 1895. Japan had just won in a spectacular fashion the war with China. This event greatly impressed the Okinawans. Japan appeared to be a modern country being equal to Western powers. People started taking pride in being members of an elite nation. On the eve of the war Okinawa prefecture was not yet covered by the conscription law and only volunteers went to fight in China (among them – what a coincidence! – the great karate masters Yabu Kentsū[31] and Hanashiro Chōmo[32]). The conscription law was introduced in Okinawa in 1898, but the army refrained from drafting Okinawans. Officers complained about their poor health, weak posture and insufficient knowledge of standard Japanese. Military physicians, however, noticed that boys practicing karate were in

[30] Morohashi Tetsuji, ed., *Dai Kanwa jiten*, Tōkyō:, Taishūkan shoten, 1989, vol. 6, p. 686.

[31] Yabu Kentsū (1866-1937) was the first enlistee from Okinawa prefecture. He achieved fame as a hero during the Sino-Japanese War and earned the nickname 'sergeant Yabu'. Upon returning to Okinawa he worked as a military instructor at the teachers college and then as a recruiting officer at the conscription board. For his service during the Russo-Japanese War (1905) he was promoted to lieutenant. He has been remembered as a propagandist of militarism (*Okinawa daihyakka jiten*, vol. 3, p. 736).

[32] Hanashiro Chōmo (known also as Hanagusuku Chōmo, 1869-1945) volunteered to the army in 1890 and fought at the Sino-Japanese and Russo-Japanese wars. He ended his military career in the rank of lieutenant. Before he opened his own *dōjō*, he worked as a physical education instructor at a middle school. Hanashiro included into his style elements of other Japanese martial arts which he had learnt in the army (*Okinawa daihyakka jiten*, vol. 3, pp. 234-5).

much better shape. The prefecture office therefore came with a proposal to introduce karate to one middle school on a trial basis. The idea was brought to fruition in 1901. From then onward the militarist aspect accompanied the philosophy of karate. In 1908 Itosu Ankō published 'Ten Commands' where he advised introducing karate to primary schools:

> If we let children start learning karate in primary school, certainly this will facilitate their military training in the future and in a longer perspective will be beneficial to the army and society. As Lord Wellington said after defeating Napoleon at the Battle of Waterloo, 'today's battle had been won in our country at the playing fields of schools'.[33]

Thanks to Funakoshi, karate was recognized by the highest echelon of officers in the Imperial Army. Funakoshi eagerly accepted an invitation from Admiral Yashiro Rokurō to train his children. He also felt privileged to see General Oka Chikamatsu endorsing his book *Rentan goshin karate jutsu* (*Strengthening the spirit and skills of self-defense through techniques of karate*, 1925). Oka contributed with a short essay entitled 'Kokumin kyōka no ryōshiryō' ('A suitable material for educating the nation') where he clearly suggested that karate should be employed for the purpose of preparing the nation for a war. Paraphrasing the words of Prussian Marshall von Moltke he wrote: 'Permanent peace is a dream and not even a beautiful dream. War is a fundamental principle of the world order given from God'.[34]
By the outbreak of the war in China in 1937 the language of karate was permeated with the nationalist ideology. The opening chapter of Nakasone's *Overview of karate-dō* contained the following passage:

> In order to expand the imperial rule and to materialize the vision of *hakkō ichiu*[35], our nation has to stand the severest trials and to overcome them. This great mission can only be accomplished if everyone in our nation will go through the pain of training of mind and body. It is like a duty towards ancestors: everyone, with

[33] 'Itosu jikkai' ('Ten Commands by Itosu Ankō'), in: Kinjō Hiroshi, *Karate taikan* (*An Overview of Karate*), Tōkyō: Shuppankan bukku kurabu, 2003, p. 7.
[34] Funakoshi Gichin, *Rentan goshin karate jutsu*, p. 282
[35] *Hakkō ichiu* (lit. 'eight corners, one world') was a propaganda slogan glorifying the project of building a unified Asia under Japanese rule.

> no exception, has to follow the training of *budō* to forge one's unyielding mind and iron body.[36]

In the eyes of Nakasone the sacred principle of *karate ni sente nashi* did not stay at odds with the ideology of expansionism. War was justified if conducted for a right cause, we learn from his commentaries to Funakoshi's 'Twenty Principles' (it needs to be emphasized that the commentaries were authorized by Funakoshi):

> Principle Three: Karate serves the right cause (*karate wa gi no tasuke*).
> *Gi* means righteousness. When serving the just cause, the use of force is unavoidable. Our Imperial Army is unrivaled in the world. Its strength cannot be matched. How come our army is so strong? Its power comes from the power of faith. It comes from a strong belief that we fight against the injustice in the name of Heaven. This power lets us be like living bullets that hit through the iron walls and strike enemy's vehicles and gasoline tanks to blow them up. This power comes from a strong belief that we fight for a just cause. When a man is convinced that he does a right thing, he becomes most powerful. (…) Karate is a martial art of empty hands, where hands and feet shall be compared to a sword. One shall not use it for an unjust cause. One shall always stand on the side of righteousness. One shall use the great power of karate only as a last resort.[37]

Whether the Japanese Imperial Army was committing atrocities in China in the name of a just cause, neither Nakasone nor Funakoshi, nor other ordinary people in Japan bothered to ask.

The Myth of Empty Hands

Karate literally means 'empty hand' and is written with characters 空手. This, however, is not the original name. Before these characters were accepted, karate was known as 'Chinese hand' 唐手 and its alternative name, written with the same characters, was *tōde*. It was only in the 1930s that karate masters started using the two variations interchangeably with the 'Chinese hand' gradually giving way to the 'empty hand'. The change

[36] Nakasone Genwa, *Karate dō taikan*, pp. 1-2.
[37] Ibidem, p. 70.

probably would not have been sanctioned by the Karate Association without Funakoshi Gichin who insisted most fervently on it. Following his suggestion, Okinawan masters officially adopted the new name in 1936.
For Okinawan people, who desperately sought recognition as genuine Japanese, it was a quite uncomfortable situation to acknowledge Chinese influences in their culture, in particular after the outbreak of hostilities in China in the 1930s. Funakoshi was well aware of a contradiction in recognizing the Chinese karate as a part of Japanese *budō*. Hence he came to claim that karate had originally been indigenous to Okinawa and only influenced by *quanfa*. Since Okinawa was and always had been Japanese, the contradiction was solved. And so the tradition of 'empty hand' was born that naturally needed some rationalization in history. Karate thus was said to be developed in the time when weapons were banned in Okinawa. This brings us back to the story of King Shō Shin and then to the Japanese invasion in 1609.
The 'empty hand' has withstood the trial of time as it neatly sustained the martyrology of Okinawan people. The story begins in 1609 when Japanese Lord Shimazu of Satsuma invaded the kingdom. In the consciousness of people this event has risen to a symbol of national tragedy. Popular narratives have depicted the post-invasion period as a dark time of enslavement and colonization. As we learn, on the surface the kingdom retained sovereignty and continued to maintain tributary relations with China, but in reality it was turned into a puppet state of Satsuma. King Shō Nei was forced to sign a humiliating oath in Japan that made him a vassal of Lord Shimazu. From then onward the Ryukyuans had to send annual tributary mission to Satsuma. From time to time they dispatched envoys to Edo to pay homage to the shogun. The Japanese retained the authority to meddle in domestic affairs of the kingdom, to begin with the succession to the throne and the appointment of high officials, and imposed heavy taxes. They took control of trade with China and became its main beneficiaries. The Amami Islands were incorporated into Satsuma's domain. In order to subdue opposition, a ban on weapons was enforced.
Western karatekas have furthermore reinterpreted this history by adding some flavor of romanticism: Not only had Satsuma invaded Okinawa, but also occupied it. The Japanese were said to organize 'sword hunting', they collected all weapons and allowed people to possess only one knife per village that was always guarded by two armored samurai. The brave people of Okinawa, however, resisted and staged guerilla wars despite the fact that they could match only their bare hands against the samurai swords. And

this is how karate was born – a martial art that had been passed from generation to generation in deep secrecy from the occupant.[38]

We owe the martyrological interpretation of Ryukyuan history to Iha Fuyū. Iha was the author of the so-called 'Theory of Japanese-Ryukyuan Common Ancestry' (*Nichiryū dōsoron*) that defined Okinawa as an inseparable part of Japanese civilization. This theory enabled Iha to call the annexation of Ryukyu 'national unification'. Yet he had to acknowledge that in spite of this reunification the Japanese continued to perceive Okinawa as an alien country and discriminate against its people. He recognized this situation as a legacy of Satsuma's invasion. As he argued, Satsuma's oppressive policy had created an emotional gap between the Japanese and Okinawans that ultimately turned into the main obstacle to Okinawa's assimilation. From Iha's works we receive an image of a lonely island, abandoned and oppressed by Japan.[39] Together with the experience of the Battle of Okinawa and the American occupation, Iha's story has significantly contributed to the rise of a victim syndrome in Okinawan society.

In reality the history of Satsuma-Ryukyuan relations was more complex. Iha and his followers were biased in their opinions as they tended to look at the whole post-invasion era only through the so-called 'Fifteen Injunctions' (*okite jūgo jō*), imposed upon the king in 1611 and symbolizing the political dependency upon Satsuma. Stories of colonization and enslavement also partially resulted from the uncritical idealization of the 'Golden Age' prior to the invasion. Satsuma indeed imposed heavy taxes and restrictions on overseas trade, but paradoxically, this forced the kingdom to become less dependent on trade with China and gave a positive stimulus to the growth of domestic production.[40] Secondly, the 'Fifteen

[38] The article about karate in German Wikipedia (http://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Karate, accessed on 22 March 2008), designated as 'featured article', represents a quintessence of all myth about karate. See also: Peter Urban, *The Karate Dojo: Traditions and Tales of a Martial Art*, Rutland: Charles E. Tuttle Company, 1989, pp. 92-93; Robin L. Rielly, *Karate Training: The Samurai Legacy and Modern Practice*, Rutland: Charles E. Tuttle Company, 1985, p. 33; George Mattson, *The Way of Karate*, Rutland: Charles E. Tuttle Company, 1970, pp. 24-5; Jim Silvan, *Okinawa Karate: Its Teachers and Their Styles*, New York: Ventage Press, 1993, pp. 9-10. George Dillman and Chris Thomas, *Advanced Pressure Point Fighting of Ryukyu Kempo*, Reading (PA): George Dillman Karate International, 1994, p. 27; Alan Dollar, *Secrets of Uechi Ryu Karate and the Mysteries of Okinawa*, Antioch: Cherokee Publishing, 1996, pp. 245-8; Michael Rosenbaum, *Okinawa's Complete Karate System: Isshin-ryu*, Boston: YMAA Publication Center, 2001, p. 5.

[39] See his books: *Kotōku no Ryūkyū shi*; *Nantō shi kō* (*On the history of the Southern Islands*), in: *Iha Fuyū Zenshū*, vol. 2; *Okinawa rekishi monogatari: Nihon no shukuzu* (*The Story of Okinawan History: Japan in Miniature*), in: *Iha Fuyū Zenshū*, vol. 2.

[40] This problem has been discussed in length by Araki Moriaki in *Shin Okinawa shi ron* (*New*

Injunctions' by no means determined the shape of the kingdom. Some of the regulations were quickly abandoned (e.g. sending hostages to Satsuma) or never obeyed (the ban on granting stipends to females).[41] Lord Shimazu retained the right to interfere in the domestic affairs of the kingdom, but he did this very seldom. In many cases he was simply not able to exercise his authority. Besides, Satsuma could not sufficiently control Sino-Ryukyuan trade; the Ryukyuans had often been defrauding Satsuma's funds or bringing goods of poor quality to Kagoshima.[42] Satsuma might indeed have exercised considerable power during the first few post-invasion decades, but its influence gradually declined. It increased again shortly before the collapse of the Tokugawa shogunate, when Lord Shimazu Nariakira skillfully played Ryukyu against the *bakufu*, but again – one should not look at the Ryukyuan history only from the perspective of the late Tokugawa period.

Satsuma's authority in Okinawa was represented by an official *zaiban bugyō* (resident commissioner). As historian Maehira Fusaaki pointed out, *zaiban bugyō* had absolutely no authority to interfere in the domestic affairs of the kingdom, or to exercise influence upon Ryukyuan officials etc. His role was only to serve as an agent between the kingdom and Satsuma. Despite the fact that he supervised observation of the ban on Christianity he had no right to try Ryukyuans for violating it. Maehira emphasized that the post of *zaiban bugyō* could by no means be compared to the governor of a colony.[43]

Finally, it is hard to speak of 'colonization and enslavement' if no Japanese forces were stationed in Okinawa. Once King Shō Nei had been released from captivity in Japan in 1611, Satsuma withdrew its forces. For a brief time it kept some troops on the Yaeyama Islands in the 1640s. This, however, was not to exercise political pressure on the Ryukyuans, but to keep watch over southern seas, which were at that time frequently visited by European ships. After a few years the matter of sea surveillance was handed to the Ryukyuans.[44]

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discourse on Okinawan History). Naha: Okinawa taimususha, 1980.

[41] Tomiyama Kazuyuki, 'Hanzai to keibatsu' ('Crimes and Penalties'), in: Ryūkyū Shimpōsha, ed., *Shin Ryūkyū shi: kinsei hen* (1) (The New History of Ryukyu: Early Modern Times, Part One), Naha: Ryūkyū Shimpōsha, 1992, pp. 262-3; Gregory Smits, *Visions of Ryūkyū: Identity and Ideology in Early-Modern Thought and Politics*, Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 1999, p. 17.

[42] Gregory Smits, p. 23.

[43] Maehira Fusaaki, 'Zaiban sei no seiritsu' ('The formation of the Zaiban System'). In: Ryūkyū Shimpōsha, ed. *Shin Ryūkyū shi: kinsei hen* (1), p. 115.

[44] Ibidem, pp. 110-1.

In light of all that we have seen above some myths about karate need to be revised. First of all, karate could not be developed as a martial art against the Japanese swords, because Okinawa was not occupied. No guerilla wars took ever place here. Secondly, it is not true that Satsuma imposed a ban on weapons. It only banned the export of weapons to Ryukyu – a small difference, but quite significant. As Sakihara Mitsugu noted, this ban was a consequence of Tokugawa's embargo on arms going overseas.[45] The story of 'sword hunting' is a typical example of how the Westerners confuse Okinawa with Japan. The metaphorical 'sword hunting' (*katanagari*) took place in Japan by order of Toyotomi Hideyoshi at the end of the 16th century (Toyotomi intended to make a clear-cut division between the samurai and peasantry), but his authority did not reach the Ryukyus. Besides one can hear stories in the West that karate was developed by peasants. Master Dan Bradley, for instance, claims that:

> [Karate] spread slowly by word of mouth and by secret practice to the island of Okinawa (…), where in feudal times the peasantry were not allowed to carry weapons. To defend themselves against the cruel war lords the peasants resorted to the ancient exercises of Bhodidharma [original spelling – S.M.] and refined them into unarmed punching, chopping and kicking methods which through practice became lethal techniques in themselves when employed by experts.[46]

This too looks problematic considering that Ryukyuan peasants rarely revolted (chronicles and annals recorded only a few cases), and besides all known masters and founders of Naha-te, Shuri-te and Tomari-te came from the aristocracy. Apparently Bradley must have confused Okinawa with Tokugawa Japan, where peasant protests indeed took place nearly on daily basis.[47]

Lastly, one should not put too much faith in stories that the knowledge of karate had been kept in deepest secrecy. Indeed, Funakoshi recalled in his memoirs that he trained with his masters always at night. On the other hand karate masters seemed to be well known and respected persons – that is the impression one receives from Funakoshi's book. Karate might have been

[45] Mitsugu Sakihara, p. 544.
[46] Dan Bradley, *Step by Step Karate Skills*, Middlesex: The Hamlyn Publishing Group, 1987, p. 8.
[47] Stephen Vlastos provided the number of three-thousand protests for the entire Tokugawa period. See: Stephen Vlastos, *Peasant Protests and Uprisings in Tokugawa Japan*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986, p. 10.

practiced out of public view, but one shall not jump to the conclusion that it was a secret art that only the chosen had been admitted to. Considering the power of communalism in Ryukyuan society, everyone knew well who was who and it was highly improbable that someone could do something without neighbors' knowledge. There was no tradition of secret societies in the Ryukyus and the Ryukyuans had no purpose to hide karate. When in 1866 Chinese envoys arrived in Okinawa with the investiture for King Shō Tai, citizens of Shuri, Tomari and Kumemura came up with an initiative to include martial arts in the entertainment program for the Chinese. Noblemen from Kumemura organized an open parade that included the performance of music, dances and karate.[48] It is reasonable to argue that the myth of 'secrecy' has been invented to secure the continuity of tradition in the situation where no written sources were available. After all karate is an ancient art, dating back to the time of the legendary monk Bodhidharma – the alleged founder of Chinese martial arts – and hence the gap of unrecorded history must be somehow filled.

Conclusions

Karate has gone through a complex process of evolution. Originally 'Chinese hand', it reflected Ryukyuans' pride of their affiliation with the Chinese world. As Japanese *budō*, it helped enhance the Japanese identity of Okinawan people. As 'empty hand' – an art that renounces violence – it came to represent the spirit of a peace-loving people and thus it has been appropriated by narratives claiming the ethnic distinctiveness of Okinawa. In the West it has become a mirror of Asia – a deformed mirror, but helping the Westerners to understand and enunciate their self.

There is no such thing as one, true karate. Depending on time and circumstances, karate was embedded with a different load of symbols, served different purposes and fulfilled different functions. There is no contradiction in the fact that it preached the principle of nonviolence at the same time that it served the apparatus of war propaganda. Of course, one may say that karate was only misappropriated by the nationalist ideology, but this would bring us back to the question of what 'real' karate is, and in extension to the fruitless discussion about the truth in tradition.

[48] Shimabukuro Zempatsu, 'Taafwaakuu' ('On the Taafwaakuu Drama'), in: *Shimabukuro Zempatsu chosakushū* (*Compiled Works of Shimabukuro Zempatsu*), Tōkyō: Okinawasha, 1956, pp. 298-306.

Karate neatly demonstrates the dynamics of ethnic boundaries. An ethnic boundary, in Frederik Barth's understanding,[49] is contingent upon cultural differences that are relevant to social interactions between people from different ethnic groups. Cultural difference is not a matter of objective judgment, but subjective perception. The same thing that yesterday spoke for the sameness of two peoples today may speak for their distinctiveness, and vice versa. As we have seen, the same karate may weaken or strengthen the boundary between Japan and Okinawa; it all depends on how people want to see it.

[49] Barth, Frederik, 'Ethnic groups and boundaries', in: *Selected essays of Frederik Barth* – (*International library of anthropology*), *vol. 1: Process and form in social life*, London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1981.